This book marries the earlier research and research interests of Prof. Andrea Wiley on cow’s milk and on nutrition and children’s health in the United States and South Asia. More specifically, in this volume, Prof. Wiley adopts a biocultural perspective to examine how historical, cultural, political and economic forces have shaped people’s thoughts about and consumption of milk and milk products in the United States and India, two countries that rank amongst the highest globally (the European Union notwithstanding, which outranks both of them) in production and consumption of milk and milk products (page x). By studying milk, often termed a “complete food” in that it is consumed in infancy and into adulthood amongst human beings, Wiley hopes the work will contribute to how people think about and construct their bodies, which then provides a lens into how people think about and construct their social worlds.

An important question that Wiley explores in this work is a new trend in milk consumption in the two countries. While milk consumption amongst young children has been an unquestioned practice in the United States, Wiley notes that there has been a declining trend in milk consumption in the United States since World War II, while, on the contrary, India reveals an increasing consumption pattern amongst the young in milk consumption since the 1970s. This is an intriguing phenomenon especially since India has mostly consumed milk in the form of its processed products, such as ghee (clarified butter) and yoghurt. The bulk of the book explores the issues that lead to answering this question.

In Chapter 2, Wiley explains what has happened to milk that has led to the decline in consumption of fresh milk. Throughout European history, Wiley shows that milk was not popularly consumed in its fluid form, but actually processed into cheese and consumed as such due to the easy spoilage of milk without preservation techniques. She argues that it was urbanisation in Europe in the 19th century that led to the consumption of fresh milk as an essential food. Women entering the workforce made cow’s milk an essential baby food. As a non-infant food, pasteurisation and later refrigeration, as well as the focus on milk as a source of calcium, also led to the increase in fresh milk consumption in Europe, specifically England and its colony, the United States. The establishment of large-scale commercial milking operations aided this expansion in milk consumption. However, the consumption pattern of fresh milk changed after World War II. Since other beverages, such as sodas, became easily available
for children, milk became increasingly targeted at adults by the milk industry using advertising campaigns promoting its abilities at creating healthy bodies and strong bones, reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases, certain cancers, and Type 2 diabetes (p. 46). This also coincided with a decreasing population growth rate and an increasingly aging population. However, milk still features heavily in the form of cheese and yoghurt, which is being increasingly consumed by Americans.

Chapter 3 focuses on the consumption of milk in India. India has had an indigenous dairying industry since the earliest Harappan cultures, as well as the invading Indo-European pastoralists who arrived around 4,000 years ago from the north-west and brought with them a much more extensive dairying culture. The Vedic religion of these invaders further celebrated the use of milk and the cow. Like in Europe, milk was popularly consumed in its more solid form as ghee and curds. The drinking of fresh milk as a beverage owes its popularity to the British colonisers through the introduction of tea into the Indian diet. Milk tea was popularised by the British, and it began to be consumed by Indians as well; however, the Indian version added tea to milk, in contrast to the British version that added milk to tea. The consumption of milk as a beverage on its own had to do with another form of invasion from Europe and the United States. In the late 1960s, donations from European countries and the US targeted the expansion of the Indian dairy industry under the auspices of the World Food Programme (WFP). Rather than being based on a solely humanitarian purpose, the WFP was a way of disposing the surplus milk produced in Europe and the US, thereby sustaining the dairy industries in these two continents. Urbanisation and the rise of a moneyed middle-class population that began to embrace Western values on the importance of nutrients in milk led to the increase in milk consumption amongst urban Indians, which was just the opposite situation as when compared to the decline in fresh milk consumption amongst Americans.

Chapter 4 discusses the multiple and changing meanings and understanding of milk in Indian and American societies. Wiley skillfully shows how the Indian religious veneration of the cow is not totally based on its milk-giving properties, since buffalos yield more milk than the poor milk-yielding Indian Zebu cow species. Though many Indians do not care about the source of the milk, Ayurvedic notions privilege cow’s milk over buffalo milk saying it is more easily digested compared to the latter. While the United States does not possess similar religious veneration of the cow, there seems to be an equally sacred reverence for the cow, much of which comes from a humoral theory of disease and later biomedical perspectives on human digestion. Despite the fact that the inability to digest milk amongst African and native American populations was recognised in the early 1900s through biomedical research, the promotion